Speech from the Throne 2009

Delivered on the Occasion of the Opening of

The Third Session of the Twenty Sixth Legislature Province of Saskatchewan

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The Honourable Dr. Gordon L. Barnhart
Lieutenant Governor of Saskatchewan

MOVING FORWARD

It is my pleasure to welcome you to the Third Session of the Twenty-Sixth Legislature.

INTRODUCTION

Albert Einstein, a man who used his prodigious intellect to unlock the secrets of the universe, once made this simple but elegant observation:

"Life is like riding a bicycle. To keep your balance, you must keep moving."

In 2009, our province has faced the challenge of a global economic recession.

Saskatchewan has met this challenge and kept its balance because we kept moving – moving forward.

In the past year, Saskatchewan's population has grown faster than at any time since the early 1950s.

Think about that.

In a year where the headlines across Canada and throughout the world were all about recession and economic gloom, Saskatchewan grew by over 16,000 people – the equivalent of adding a new city the size of Yorkton.

Saskatchewan continues to post the lowest unemployment rate in the country, while Saskatoon and Regina have the lowest unemployment among major Canadian cities.

While Saskatchewan has felt the impact of the recession, today there are optimistic signs the recovery is slowly starting to take hold.

In the September 2009 edition of its Provincial Outlook, the Royal Bank of Canada states the Canadian economy is "poised to return onto a recovery track."

The report concludes next year's economic recovery is expected to be widespread.

All ten Canadian provinces are projected to expand in 2010, with western Canada leading the way.

This report anticipates a growth rate of 3.6 per cent in Saskatchewan in 2010 and states:

"*....This would return the province (Saskatchewan) to the head of the pack in terms of provincial growth rates." (RBC Provincial Outlook, September 2009, pg. 4)*

My government believes this level of performance is achievable and realistic, because of the industrious, resourceful and prudent nature of Saskatchewan people.

My government has spent considerable effort in the past year maintaining and enhancing Saskatchewan's economic advantage through lower property and income taxes, a massive reduction in the provincial debt, and a record investment in infrastructure.

This record investment in infrastructure includes $1.2 billion to rebuild and repair over 3,200 kilometers of provincial highways over the past two years.

DEBT REDUCTION

Since taking office, my government has reduced the province's debt by $2.7 billion, or nearly 40 per cent.

In his 2009 Report "Understanding the Finances of the Government," the Provincial Auditor noted that as a result of debt reduction: "*A greater proportion of the Government's revenue was spent providing services instead of paying interest charges." (Provincial Auditor 2009 Report, Volume 2, page 1)*

However, this report also pointed to an inherent vulnerability in the Saskatchewan economy—a vulnerability that suggests the need to change the budgetary process.

This spring, as the recession was taking its toll on government revenues all across Canada, my government presented its budget.

This document contained a forecast for potash revenues of $1.9 billion.

The forecast was based on a review of past volume levels, recent sales and prices, and on the most up-to-date projections.

This forecast was wrong.

Steps will be taken to modify the budgetary process in the future to reduce the impact of wild fluctuations in natural resource revenues.

KEEPING OUR BALANCE

While Saskatchewan continues to move forward, my government has worked hard to maintain the proper balance between growth and ensuring that all Saskatchewan people enjoy the benefits of that growth.

Housing and training allowances have been increased.

My government has provided more daycare spaces and more opportunities for persons with disabilities.

We have increased assistance to low income seniors by doubling the Seniors Income Plan benefit and 80,000 low income individuals in our province no longer pay any income tax at all.

Still, there is more to be done to keep Saskatchewan moving forward.

HEALTH

During this session, my government will focus much attention on improving our healthcare system.

We will set specific goals and work to achieve those goals.

Upon assuming office, my government was confronted with a serious shortage in the health care system.

There were simply not enough nurses to provide the care needed for our sick and infirm.

In response to this shortage, my government did what others had refused to do. It set a bold, new goal.

That goal was to recruit 800 additional nurses within four years.

Today, my government is pleased to report that we are well on our way to achieving this important goal.

As of today, 560 more nurses are working in Saskatchewan than when my government assumed office.

70 per cent of our goal has been achieved in less than two years.

My government wishes to congratulate and thank the many people who have established new nursing careers throughout our province.

The success of the nursing recruitment initiative shows there is power in setting bold goals.

Now, it is time to set another ambitious goal in health care.

For many years, there has been a surgical backlog in Saskatchewan.

This has created unacceptably long wait times for Saskatchewan patients.

My government recently received the final report of the Patient First Review, and during this session, we will outline our response to the recommendations of this report.

As a result of the excellent work of Mr. Tony Dagnone, and in response to the unacceptable surgical backlog, my government has set a bold, new goal.

Over the next four years, we will reduce surgical wait times in Saskatchewan to no longer than three months.

The plan to achieve this goal will be outlined during this session.

Saskatchewan has made significant progress in increasing the number of nurses working in our province, but the number of physicians in Saskatchewan remains a concern for the people of our province and our government.

Saskatchewan has fewer family physicians than the national average, fewer specialists and retains fewer of its medical graduates.

Our physician recruitment strategy is a partnership with regional health authorities, the Saskatchewan Medical Association and its physician members, the University of Saskatchewan's College of Medicine and its students, the Saskatchewan College of Physicians and Surgeons and Saskatchewan communities.

This recruitment strategy will increase the number of physicians working in the province and enhance access to health care for Saskatchewan citizens.

The main focus of the strategy is to retain our province's medical graduates and residents so the people of Saskatchewan benefit from the dollars we spend training doctors in our province.

The shortage of long-term care spaces continues to be a concern for Saskatchewan seniors and their families.

In recent weeks, the Legislative Secretary to the Minister of Health has traveled throughout the province, consulting with Saskatchewan people on improving care for seniors.

The results of these talks will form the basis of a plan to improve access to long-term care for seniors.

My government will also respond to concerns about the province's needle exchange program.

There is a need to balance harm reduction and improved health outcomes with broader concerns for public safety.

Therefore, my government will introduce changes to limit the proliferation of needles handed out by needle exchange programs.

Ultimately, this program cannot be allowed to function as a source of unlimited free needles.

My government will tighten controls around both the numbers of needles exchanged and distributed.

We will cap the number of needles given out at any one time, thus creating more frequent contact with health professionals, which in turn means more frequent opportunity for intervention and treatment.

Our goal should not simply be safer drug use.

Our goals should be to reduce drug use, to break the deadly cycle of addiction and to better assure the safety of all.

To that end, my government will fulfill its commitment to re-establish an independent provincial addictions agency and build on the work of the Ministry of Health, regional health authorities and their partners to strengthen the current system of prevention, education and treatment services.

Tobacco use in Saskatchewan remains too high, particularly amongst our young people.

My government has already taken several important steps to curb smoking and the harmful effects of second-hand smoke, including enacting a ban on smoking in the workplace.

During this session, my government will take further steps to protect the health of Saskatchewan people by introducing new legislation and a comprehensive new strategy to continue the reduction of tobacco use in our province.

Jurisdictions around the world are preparing for a second wave of H1N1 influenza. Saskatchewan is well prepared.

Our government has been working and will continue to work with regional and local authorities along with First Nations and Métis leaders.

Our goal is to ensure the health and safety of the people of Saskatchewan.

EDUCATION

My government recognizes that keeping Saskatchewan moving forward requires well-trained and highly educated people.

We must prepare our children to meet the challenges of the future.

There is still much truth in the time-honoured proverb: the only thing more expensive than education is ignorance.

My government has significantly increased its share of direct funding to Saskatchewan schools – shifting the tax burden for education funding away from property taxpayers.

My government is also committed to providing high quality schools for our students.

To date, nearly $300 million has been invested by my government in pre-kindergarten to Grade 12 infrastructure – the largest amount ever invested in building and upgrading Saskatchewan schools in a two-year period.

This commitment has moved forward a wide range of improvements - everything from maintenance and repairs to brand new schools.

This funding has resulted in improvements to over 230 schools in communities in every part of Saskatchewan.

My government is also moving Saskatchewan forward by exceeding its campaign commitment to the provision of early learning and childcare opportunities.

In the current fiscal year, over $4 million has been provided for the development of 1,000 new licensed childcare spaces.

By the end of March 2010, the number of funded childcare spaces will total 11,400.

The quality of care provided to these young children is also improving.

As part of a government-wide initiative, community-based organizations now have three per cent more funding to recruit and retain early childhood educators.

An additional $1.2 million has been added to enhance their training.

My government's commitment to the education system extends beyond Grade 12.

In the past two years, my government has made the largest investment ever in post-secondary infrastructure projects – over $150 million.

More than $18 million was spent on student housing, including the first-ever SIAST student housing development at the Woodland Campus in Prince Albert and the first new residences built at the University of Saskatchewan in over 30 years.

This is an area that had unfortunately suffered from considerable neglect in the past.

No longer.

Money is also being earmarked for student loan enhancements. The weekly amount students can receive has been increased for the first time since 1994.

PUTTING VULNERABLE PEOPLE FIRST

Over the past two years, my government has made significant investments towards protecting vulnerable children, foster families and supporting extended family caregivers.

In the most recent budget, nearly $25 million was set aside to improve the child welfare system.

In the upcoming year, my government will continue this work with a thorough review of *The Child and Family Services Act* and *The Adoption Act*.

My government will also begin implementing a new electronic case management system, to provide better monitoring and protection of children and youth in its care.

Roughly one year ago, my government announced the single largest investment in Saskatchewan history for supporting people with intellectual disabilities.

It began as a four-year, $76.9 million initiative to eliminate a 440-person waitlist for programs.

By the end of this fiscal year, 264 people with intellectual disabilities will have received the help they require.

That's 264 more people receiving the services they need to lead more fulfilling, independent lives.

This is a clear example of Saskatchewan moving forward.

My government takes considerable pride in being able to report this significant progress and thanks the many people who work in community-based organizations to improve the lives of Saskatchewan people with disabilities.

Since coming to office, my government has also acted to address the shortage of low income housing in Saskatchewan. Over 500 low income units have opened in the past two years with over 500 more currently under construction and another 600 in the development and planning stages.

JUSTICE AND POLICING

My government is proud of the considerable achievements in the last two years in making Saskatchewan a safer place.

Crime rates are falling, but there is more work to do.

This is why my government will continue moving forward toward our commitment of an additional 120 police officers.

The past two years have seen the creation of an Internet Child Exploitation Unit and the Northern Drug Unit.

The Combined Forces Strategic Unit has been strengthened.

The officers in these units target organized crime activities. Their efforts have already led to several high profile arrests.

We will continue working with our neighbouring provinces to crack down on the scourge of drug trafficking and other gang activities.

My government will also introduce a number of laws that will improve safety and protect consumers.

These laws include banning texting and hand-held cell phone usage while driving, new ticket sales legislation to protect those wishing to attend events and concerts, as well as preventing members of a profession from escaping disciplinary proceedings by resigning.

AGRICULTURE

My government is committed to moving forward by making support programs for farm and ranch families more timely, simple and reliable.

To this end, my government is moving the administration of the AgriStability program to Melville and assuming from the federal government the responsibility for administering the program.

Crop insurance has been improved with innovations like yield trending, yield cushioning and 100 per cent wildlife damage compensation.

Farm and ranch families will also continue to benefit from the Agricultural Crown Land Sale Program, the Gopher Control Rebate Program and the Farm and Ranch Water Infrastructure Program, which is providing $53 million over four years for wells, dugouts and pipelines.

My government has provided over $70 million in direct support to livestock producers through the Cattle and Hog Support Program.

Most importantly, after years of governments talking about education property tax on farmland, my government has provided a long-term solution and the largest farmland property tax reduction in Saskatchewan history.

FIRST NATIONS AND MÉTIS RELATIONS

The coming year will see further work on developing guidelines covering Saskatchewan's legal obligations under court rulings that outline the duty to consult.

Saskatchewan can take considerable pride in becoming the first jurisdiction in Canada to implement Jordan's Principle – to ensure First Nations children get the medical attention they need when they need it.

My government will continue to focus on greater First Nations and Métis engagement in the economic prosperity of Saskatchewan.

Provincial government funding to the Saskatchewan Indian Institute of Technologies, the Gabriel Dumont Institute and other educational institutions will help ensure First Nations and Métis young people have the skills they need to enter Saskatchewan's growing workforce.

The Métis Nation of Saskatchewan has requested that 2010 be designated as the Year of the Métis in Saskatchewan.

My government will recognize the unique history and culture of Métis people by honouring this request and by working with the Métis Nation and other organizations to honour the Trails of 1885 celebrations in 2010.

ENVIRONMENT

In the coming months, my government will move forward with plans for a new environmental regulatory framework.

The safety of the public and protection of Saskatchewan's pristine beauty will remain its top priorities.

However, there remains considerable room for eliminating duplication and delays within existing administrative processes.

Saskatchewan's vast resource wealth and ingenuity have become an international story.

Later this year, Saskatchewan will be represented in Copenhagen at the United Nations Climate Change Conference.

On this international stage, Saskatchewan will present its unique and practical plan to ensure carbon offsets or penalties imposed on heavy greenhouse gas emitters will stay in the province.

This money will be used to fund continuing research and development of emissions-reduction technologies.

Saskatchewan will continue to move forward in its role as a world leader in carbon capture and storage through further progress on the large scale Boundary Dam clean coal project and the Saskatchewan-Montana clean coal and carbon capture initiative.

Our most important natural resource is an abundant supply of safe, clean water.

In this session, my government will be presenting a comprehensive water management plan.

It will provide security of supply for residential and commercial uses, both now and in the future.

ENERGY

My government believes we need to look at all energy options – gas turbines, cogeneration, clean coal, wind, hydro, biomass, solar, import contracts and nuclear – to determine the best way to meet Saskatchewan's future energy needs in the most affordable, reliable and environmentally-friendly manner.

A robust, advanced and reliable power system that can accommodate future growth is essential to keep Saskatchewan moving forward.

Over the past few months, Saskatchewan's energy future has been the focus of considerable public discussion.

This discussion has been timely and productive.

The Standing Committee on Crown and Central Agencies recently completed the first phase of hearings on Saskatchewan's energy future, with a second phase to take place early in the new year.

Over the course of the next year, SaskPower will develop an electrical power generation strategy to meet our province's future needs.

This strategy will include a significant commitment to increased wind power.

The past two years have also seen significant growth in the development of our oil and gas and mining sector.

My government has and will continue to work diligently to provide regulatory and tax certainty.

This will encourage major investment across Saskatchewan in coming years.

In the next year, Innovation Saskatchewan will be fully implemented.

My government's goal is to be a leader in innovation with the most aggressive innovation agenda in Canada.

MUNICIPAL AFFAIRS

One must reach all the way back to 1913 to find a year when two new Saskatchewan cities were proclaimed in the same year.

This year, it happened in the same week.

My government is pleased to welcome Martensville and Meadow Lake as Saskatchewan's newest cities.

These two communities—like all others in our province—have benefited from my government's historic commitment to increase municipal revenue sharing by tying those grants to the revenue received through the Provincial Sales Tax.

As a result, Saskatchewan communities will have predictable funding, now and into the future.

TOURISM, PARKS, CULTURE AND SPORT

Our parks, our vibrant culture and our sport and recreational opportunities make Saskatchewan a great place to live.

This year, more people than ever enjoyed Saskatchewan's beautiful provincial parks.

By the beginning of the 2010 camping season, my government will have added 600 electrified campsites, and we will continue to improve our provincial parks by electrifying more campsites.

My government is in the final stages of creating the first new Provincial Cultural Policy in 30 years. This policy will build pride and enhance the distinct character of our unique Saskatchewan communities.

We will also highlight Saskatchewan tourism, Saskatchewan business opportunities and Saskatchewan hospitality through our participation in the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympics.

Those attending the Olympics will see what Saskatchewan has to offer through our athletes, our participation in the Cultural Olympiad and a first-class Olympic pavilion that will showcase Saskatchewan to people from around the world.

IMMIGRATION

Saskatchewan has a long and rich history of welcoming new Canadians from every part of the world.

Our province's motto reflects this rich history – "From Many Peoples, Strength."

Today we are writing a new chapter – attracting more new immigrants to Saskatchewan than at any time since the earliest days of our province's settlement.

Over the past year, Saskatchewan has welcomed nearly 8,000 newcomers from other countries.

These new Saskatchewan residents are making a strong contribution to our province's economy.

In this fiscal year, the Saskatchewan Immigrant Nominee Program has set the goal of attracting 3,400 nominations.

This represents a 100 per cent increase over the goal two years ago.

This goal will be met by reducing processing times. Last year, those times were cut by 24 per cent, despite a 47 per cent increase in applications.

My government applauds those who have worked hard to achieve this goal.

We welcome these new Canadians to the best province in the best country in the world.

CONCLUSION

One of the reasons Canada is the best country in the world is because of those who are ever willing to defend her liberty and her safety.

As Members of the Legislative Assembly were preparing to return for this session, over 20 Saskatchewan reservists were preparing for a tour of duty in Afghanistan.

My government salutes these Saskatchewan heroes and all the brave men and women who serve in Canada's armed forces.

We pray for their safety and wish them Godspeed in their mission as they risk their lives for our security, for our freedom and for the war-torn and war-weary people of Afghanistan.

In the past year, my government has honoured the courage and sacrifice of Saskatchewan's military personnel by affixing tribute decals on all government vehicles and by creating the Scholarship of Honour.

This scholarship is available to returning soldiers and to the spouse and children of permanently disabled or fallen soldiers.

To date, 11 Scholarships of Honour have been awarded and more will be awarded in the coming year.

During this session, the Public Accounts for the last fiscal year, together with the Estimates for the new year commencing April 1, 2010, will be submitted to you.

Saskatchewan poet Florence Scholer penned the following:

I am an ageless, impatient land that makes of timid men heroes;
I am the hopes and dreams and disappointments
Of long-gone pioneers.
I am history and heartache and happiness,
And I welcome all who pause here.
I am the past and the future of this great, good land.
I am Saskatchewan.

The residents of our province have much to be thankful for.

We have been blessed by providence.

Saskatchewan people are a patient people, because sometimes our blessings have come to us later than we may have hoped.

This year, summer came late to Saskatchewan.

Time and again, you heard people say how much they were enjoying the beautiful September weather, probably because they had waited so long for it to arrive.

In the same way, Saskatchewan people seem to share a special appreciation for our great province's new era of growth and opportunity, probably because they have waited so long for it to arrive.

Saskatchewan is moving forward.

To keep our balance, we must keep moving forward.

That is the goal of my government, and that is the task ahead for all Members of this Assembly.

We can do this. We will do this.